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Acutt, Bruce and Hyland, Paul and Becker, Karen L. (2004) Regional Employment Trends: The Challenge for Strategic Employment Relations. In Hyland, Paul and Stewart, Gordon, Eds. *Proceedings International Employment Relations Association Conference*, Yeppoon, Australia.

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Regional Employment Trends: The Challenge for Strategic Employment Relations

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Acknowledgements: The authors wish to thank the Australian Institute of Management and MGES Recruitment, our industry partners, for their support of this research.

Abstract

Regional Australia has been exposed to the forces of globalisation and the impact on employment has been significant. In capital cities and larger metropolitan centres fluctuations and churn in the labour market may not lead to major shortages or downturns and often these fluctuations in employment trends are short-lived. In rural and regional areas, fluctuations can cause major disruptions and shortages can be long term as it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain skilled workers to relatively isolated communities. The resulting change has forced a process of re-creation on business and this has impacted upon regional labour markets. It has been argued (Hyland, Mellor, & Stewart, 2002) that because of industrial relations reform driven by successive Federal governments, Australian workplaces have higher levels of flexibility in labour regulations and practices relative to other industrialised regions such as Europe and North America. This flexibility has resulted in changes to labour markets and in many cases skills shortages. This paper examines the labour market trends and skills shortages identified in a survey of regional and rural organisations in Queensland and the Northern Territory. An analysis of employment trends by organisational type is presented that examines three organisational categories and compares and contrasts recent employment trends for full time, part time, casual and contract workers. This analysis also compares trends between large and small enterprises and presents some findings on labour market shortages particularly in the professions, managerial positions and trades.

Introduction

Throughout the 1990's many firms adopted management approaches to help them ensure their survival and this often resulted in flatter organisational structures. These flatter organisational structures were often achieved by downsizing. According to Orr, Millen & McCarthy (1999), other programs and activities such as just-in-time manufacturing, strategic alliances, and business process re-engineering resulted in flatter organisations, team-based processes and decision making and horizontal organisational structures. All of these changes should have had an impact on the organisation of work in rural and regional organisations. Orr et al (1999) argue that the conditions in Australia in the 1990s were "ripe" for a process of business re-creation. Further they argue that because of industrial relations reform that was driven by successive Federal governments, Australian workplaces had a higher level of flexibility in labour regulations and practices relative to other industrialised regions such as Europe and North America (Orr et al., 1999:658)

Many organisations have chosen to build their capabilities through teamwork. Clifford and Sohal (1998) argue that teamwork is now an integral part of a new management paradigm. This paradigm encompasses "...management thinking to re-engineer change, and includes business processes, jobs and structures, management and measures, and values and benefits" (Clifford & Sohal, 1998:78). As this paradigm is used to develop a team-based approach, the way workers operate changes. Wellins, Byham & Wilson (1991) point out that multi-skilling and job rotation becomes part of being in a team. As team members rotate through jobs they are able to identify the skills and training they need to do a wider variety of jobs. Many organisations seeking to develop through the use of teams fail to achieve the anticipated efficiencies and increased productivity. According to Dumaine (1994) when teams are introduced as part of an overall change package they work successfully. Lee Bennett & Oakes (2000) suggest that organisations seeking to help employees interact within the wider organisation need to take an enabling approach that encourages and supports interaction. Further Adler and Borys (1996) maintain that firms using an enabling approach to improve performance have coupled the introduction of advanced technologies with increased skills and discretion in ways that empower the users.

Not all organisations have taken this approach and this approach is not necessarily suitable for all firms. In firms where there is a history of adversarial industrial relations based on conflict rather than cooperation, an enabling approach is unlikely to be accepted by long-term employees accustomed to an 'us and them' approach. Significant problems can occur for enterprises when they attempt to introduce new work practices and work organisation programs into manufacturing facilities in developing economies, and firms in the developed economies have experienced similar problems in the past. Baranson (1971) pointed out that many of the problems arise because the capabilities the firms are trying to develop or acquire are these very capabilities they need to operate the technologies and implement the programs in the first place. Given that we would expect some differences with regional organisations when they implement changes to work practices, the question needs to be asked whether Australian regions are really different when it comes to work organisation.

The Changing Nature Of Employment Relations

In order to analyse employment trends in regional Australia in context, it is crucial to first consider the direction of employment practices on a broader scale. A number of trends and emerging pressures at a global and national level have had significant impact on organisational employment practices, with an expected flow-on of these effects at a regional level. These forces shaping employment practices can be separated into three broad categories; social, economic and industrial/legal issues. The significant developments and pressures in each of these areas are briefly outlined.

Organisations are experiencing changes associated with changing social issues and situations. In particular, the changing demographics of the workforce have had significant impact on organisations to date, and will continue to effect them into the future. More women are entering the workforce and this trend is predicted to continue until at least 2010 (Brueck, 2002; Preston, 2001); the workforce is becoming more culturally diverse, and due to a declining birth rate, labour is expected to be much more difficult to attract and retain over the coming years (Wiley, 1992). This phenomenon has gained much attention recently in terms of the impacts of both an aging workforce and labour shortage on recruitment, selection and general employment practices.

Following on from the issues of gender balance and an aging workforce, there is also the subsequent challenge of a diverse workforce, particularly in relation to the three different generations; Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, now widely recognised to be present within the workforce (Gardyn, 2000; Hill, 2002), and showing significant implications for employment relations as well as organisations as a whole. Research into the differences between the Baby Boomer generation and Generation X, has shown significant differences in expectations of the employment relationship between the two (Rodriguez, Green, & Ree, 2003). With the more recent addition of Generation Y, and the further shift in expectations (Hill, 2002), it can be expected that the employment relationship will continue to change. In addition, changes in the workforce make-up have led to expectations of greater flexibility in work practices and recognition of work/life integration. Finally in relation to social issues, it is also recognised that following from the industrial era, the world of work has entered the knowledge era, fuelled by rapidly growing and changing technology. These advances and changes have resulted in a change to the nature of work in the broadest sense. Knowledge is now a strategic asset at both the individual and organisational level (Bogdanowicz & Bailey, 2002) resulting in an increased emphasis in employment relations terms on effective recruitment and retention for competitive advantage.

In economic terms, organisations are also facing increasing competition with many previously regulated markets being deregulated, and with a growing number of organisations now operating and competing on a global scale (Harbridge & Walsh, 2002). This change brings with it many challenges, the least of which is ensuring that employment relations practices and in particular, recruitment and selection systems are adapted to both cultural and national differences (Huo, Huang, & Napier, 2002).

The industrial and legal environment in which organisations now operate, also have an impact upon employment relations and employment trends. As the Australian industrial relations system has become more "...decentralised, decollectivised and in some respects deregulated" (Connell & Burgess, 2001:11), the nature of the employment relationship itself has seen significant change. Collective agreements and awards are being replaced by individual agreements. In addition to these specific industrial relations issues, there are also increased legislative requirements placed upon employers including workplace health and safety, anti-discrimination, equal employment opportunity, just to name a few. These work to increase compliance costs within many organisations and also influence the systems within the organisation. However, it is not only these specific legislative issues, but also a growing awareness of the importance of corporate citizenship (Clarkson, 1995; Davenport, 2000) as an integral part of corporate strategy that will also have an impact upon employment relations.

Queensland And Northern Territory Indicators

According to the ABS (2003), employment conditions in Queensland have improved in the last two quarters of 2003, with jobs growth in trend terms improving slightly from 0.1% in July to 0.2% in August 2003. This is in contrast to the national level of employment which fell marginally in August, after falling 0.1% in the four months from April to July 2003. In Queensland real jobs growth increased by 2,800 persons in August, compared with a decrease of 2,100 persons nationally. Employment growth across the state was driven by full-time employment (up 3,000 persons) during August 2003. With a 3.1% growth, Queensland continued to record higher annual jobs growth

than the rest of Australia with 1.7% in the August 2003 period. Queensland accounted for over one-third (53,600 jobs) of all jobs created in Australia (159,300 jobs) in the year. The rise in employment in the state was largely matched by labour force growth (up 1,400 persons) in August, causing the trend unemployment rate to be unchanged at 6.7% - its lowest rate since January 1990 (nationally, down 0.1% to 6.0%).

In comparison, in the Northern Territory (NT Treasury, 2003) employment increased by 0.6% to 94 900 in November 2003. In real terms, Territory employment fell by 1.0% to 96,800, down from 97,800 in October. The participation rate increased by 0.2% to 70.3% in November. This can be compared to the nationally, seasonally adjusted employment increase of 20,700 (0.2%) in November, well above market expectations of an increase of 10 000. The seasonally adjusted participation rate decreased to 63.7%, down 0.1 of a percentage point from October. The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was steady at 5.6%. Seasonally adjusted ANZ job ads in the Territory fell by 5.5% in November, following a fall of 0.8% in October. In the three months to November 2003, job ads were down 3.4% compared to the three months to November 2002

In 2004 these trends in Queensland have continued (ABS, 2004). Employment conditions in Queensland remained strong, despite trend employment growth easing to 0.3% in January 2004, from a peak of 0.6% in October 2003. Nationally, jobs growth also eased, with trend employment growth of 0.2% in January after four months of growth at 0.3%. Queensland (3.9%) recorded annual growth at more than double the national rate (1.8%), and recorded the largest annual rise in employment (up 69,500 persons) of any state, accounting for over 41% of the national rise in employment over the year. In labour market terms, Queensland is the key growth state for jobs in Australia, however are these jobs all located in the economic control room of Queensland in the South East of the State or are they dispersed throughout the State? Full-time employment (up 7,900 persons) continued to drive the overall increase in Queensland employment in January 2004. As a result, the annual rise in full-time employment (69,000) has accounted for almost all jobs created in the state. Given the nature of many of the key sectors such as agriculture and tourism, this growth in fulltime jobs is surprising. Much has also been made of the impact of unfair dismissal legislation and its impact on full time jobs growth. A CPA survey (reported in the Australian Financial Review 2002) suggested that the legislation was an impediment to employment. Jobs growth in Queensland (6,200) exceeded labour force growth (5,000) in January, reducing the trend unemployment rate to 5.9% – its lowest rate since March 1982 (nationally, unchanged at 5.6%).

Similar trends have continued in NT according to NT Treasury (2004), employment increased by 0.9% to 97,400 in January 2004, the fifth consecutive month of growth. In real terms, Territory employment fell by 1.4% to 95,300, down from 96,700 in December. The trend participation rate increased by 0.4 of a percentage point to 71.7% in January. The Territory was the only Australian jurisdiction to record negative growth in trend employment. The trend unemployment rate in the Territory improved (that is, it fell) by 1.2 percentage points through the year to January 2004. Unemployment rates fell in all states and territories except South Australia (up 0.5%). Tasmania recorded the largest improvement in the unemployment rate, down 2.2% compared to January 2003. Seasonally adjusted ANZ job ads in the Territory increased by 1.8% in January,

following a fall of 3.1% in December. In the three months to January 2004, job ads were up 4.0% compared to the three months to January 2003.

According to ABS (2003) forward indicators suggest employment conditions should continue to improve in Queensland. The ANZ job advertisement series has risen in each of the six months to August 2003 to reach a level not seen since the pre-GST construction boom. Similarly, monthly growth in nominal retail turnover has also reached its highest rate (1.2%) since October 1993, with the exception of the spike in retail prices associated with the introduction of the GST in July 2000. While for 2004 (ABS, 2004) indicators suggest some easing in jobs growth in January. A lower than expected post-Christmas recovery has resulted in seasonally adjusted job advertisement numbers decreasing in January and a decline in the trend job ads series. Another engine of jobs growth, the housing sector, has slowed with monthly growth in trend approvals for private houses declining from 3.0% in June 2003 to only 0.5% in December, 2003.

While employment trends in Queensland are fairly stable, the Northern Territory suffers from high volatility. The fall in employment from late 2002 to December 2003 is largely attributable to the fallback in employment associated with the Darwin-Alice Springs railway being completed, combined with the continued downturn in international tourism. In 2004 there has been an upturn in trend employment in the early part of the year that is attributable to construction and other activity for Bayu-Undan stage two. Nonetheless, employment continues to be affected by the continued downturn in international tourism. Weaker international tourism activity has been associated with the downturn in global economic growth exacerbated by the threat of terrorism and, more recently, the SARS outbreak. Further, the strong appreciation of the Australian dollar against the Territory's major tourist source-market currencies has had a further negative impact on tourism-related employment.

Skills Shortages

There are significant shortages of skilled staff and professionals throughout Queensland and the Northern Territory but not all categories of employment are reported or recorded. Only those categories matching the Department of Education and Workplace Relations (DEWR) definition are recorded. Skill shortages exist according to DEWR (2003) when employers are unable to fill or have considerable difficulty in filling vacancies for an occupation, or specialised skill needs within that occupation, at current levels of remuneration and conditions of employment, and reasonably accessible location. Shortages are typically for specialised and experienced workers, and can coexist with relatively high unemployment overall or in the occupation. An occupation may be assessed as in shortage even though not all specialisations are in shortage. Occupations may be in shortage in particular geographical areas and not in others.

Similarly recruitment difficulties as defined by DEWR (2003) occur when employers have some difficulty in filling vacancies for an occupation. There may be an adequate supply of skilled workers, but employers are still unable to attract and recruit sufficient suitable employees. While recruitment difficulties are not as widespread as shortages they still occur mainly in regional and non-metropolitan areas (DEWR, 2003). The recruitment difficulties may be due to characteristics of the industry, occupation or employer, such as relatively low remuneration, poor working conditions, poor image of the industry, unsatisfactory working hours, location hard to commute to, ineffective

recruitment advertising and processes or organisation specific and highly-specialised skill needs.

Queensland has reported shortages according to DEWR (2003) in accountants, registered nurses and in many health specialist areas with an audiologist: shortage evident in regional areas outside south east Queensland and sonographers are short in regional areas only. Secondary teachers are also in short supply and shortages in specialist areas are reported state wide but more general shortages are apparent in all areas except south-east Queensland. The trades area is also reporting shortage state-wide with the worst shortages in electrical appliance serviceperson and industrial electrician. Food trades have reported difficulties in recruiting chefs and cooks while in the construction sector there is a regional shortage and difficulty in recruiting plumbers. Printing trades are in short supply as are other trades such as hairdressers and furniture upholsterers. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills shortages are evident throughout Queensland although there appears to be no reported shortages of communication specialists in areas such as radio, broadband CDMA and satellite design.

The Northern Territory has reported recruitment difficulties in regional areas with accountants, metal fabricators, welders and child care workers. There are also overall recruitment difficulties with electricians, carpenters, cabinetmakers, information and communication technology specialists (numerous specialisations), project managers, systems analysts, main frame administrators and computer security personnel. state-wide shortages of child care coordinators, civil engineers, nurses (numerous specialisations), registered midwives, mental health nurses, enrolled nurses, pharmacists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, dental assistants, secondary teachers, social workers, metal trades workers, motor mechanics, panel beaters, auto electricians, vehicle painters, air conditioning mechanics, plasterers, plumbers, chefs, bakers, cooks, pastrycooks, hairdressers and e commerce workers. Secondary teachers are in overall short supply, however there are greater shortages of physics and chemistry teachers (DEWR, 2003).

According to Heather Ridout, CEO of the Australian Industry Group, the skill shortages in the trades will only get worse throughout Australia, "One hundred and seventy thousand tradesmen are going to leave industry over the next five years, at the moment only 40,000 look like coming in....we're facing a looming crisis in skills shortages" (Ridout, 2004). The Australian Government is aware of the criticality of these shortages and in April of this year the Minister for Education, Science and Training, Dr Brendan Nelson announced a National Skills Shortage Strategy (Nelson, 2004). Part of this strategy will entail work with regional stakeholders on pilots to address the problem. One such pilot is scheduled to be run in the Townsville region (DEST, 2004), this region forms part of the findings reported in this paper.

Research Aims And Objectives

Given the changing nature of employment relations generally, the reported skill shortages and fact that employment indicators suggest that employment levels are rising particularly in Queensland and the Northern Territory, it was considered important to identify the factors impacting on employment, recruitment and training to gauge current and predicted trends.

Consequently, the results reported in this paper are based upon a survey conducted with employers throughout the northern part of Queensland and the Northern Territory with the overall aim of determining pre-employment qualifications, recruitment and selection approaches and the nature and content of post-appointment training. In particular, the objectives of the study were to:

- Determine managers' preferred entry qualifications for employees in ten categories of employment;
- Compare preferred entry qualifications with the minimum entry qualifications across different levels within categories;
- Determine any training schemes, professional development programmes or additional qualifications that managers expect employees to undertake after commencing employment;
- Examine the nature and modes of delivery of additional training or qualifications that employees undertake after commencing employment; and
- Determine if there are any perceived gaps between generic qualifications and skills and organisations' specific needs

Methodology

This study utilised a self-administered questionnaire that was predominantly distributed by mail. The questionnaire was based upon a previously administered survey (Miller, Acutt, & Kellie, 2002) however additional questions were added based upon the requirement to extend the study to consider recruitment and selection approaches, and training and development strategies.

Sample

The population frame consisted of all employers both public and private sector, in non-metropolitan Queensland and the Northern Territory who were listed on the databases of either the Australian Institute of Management or MGES Recruitment. The convenience sample of firms was drawn from the service, resources and manufacturing sectors. A total of 70 responses were received at the time of this analysis. Of those responding, 52 (76%) of respondents were located in non-metropolitan Queensland and 10 (15%) in the Northern Territory. In terms of industry representation within the sample, the industries with the highest representation (50% of respondents) came from the four sectors classified as public administration and defence; finance, property and business services; mining, and professional services. The remainder were spread across twelve other nominated sectors, representing a broad range of industries. With regards to the type of businesses responding, single business units (private or public) represented 49% (33) of respondents; branches or franchises represented 26% (18) and public service represented 25% (17).

Findings

Labour Turnover

The results from the section of the survey relating to labour turnover highlight some interesting points in relation to the experience of those organisations operating in non-metropolitan Queensland and the Northern Territory. Respondents were asked to provide details of their own organisations turnover, as well as an indication of the turnover within their industry. Figures 1 and 2 respectively, show these results.

From these results, the area of interest is the high level of turnover being reported by single businesses, private and public, however they are also reporting an opinion that generally there is an extremely high turnover in their particular industry also.

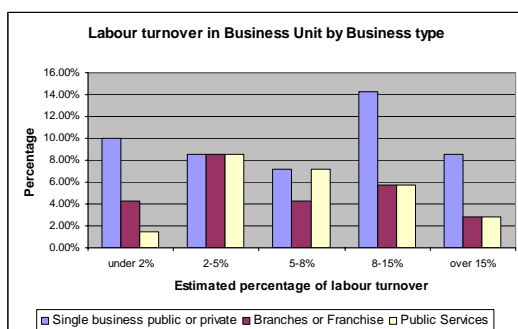


Figure 1. Labour turnover by business type

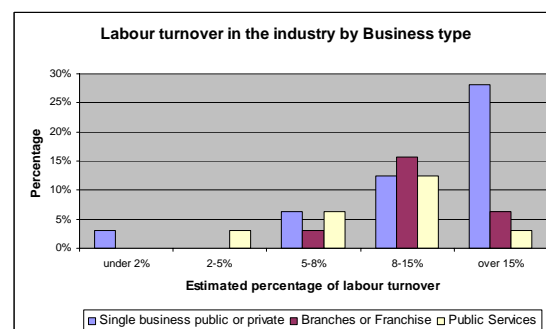


Figure 2. Perceived industry turnover by business type

Skills Shortages

Following on from these reported labour turnover figures, respondents were then asked to indicate the positions which they were having the most difficulty in filling. As Figure 3 indicates, the largest single occupational category where a shortage of skills is being reported is that of professionals, with 51% of those positions reported falling into this ABS nominated category. The second highest skill shortage was reported in the category of tradespersons and related workers.

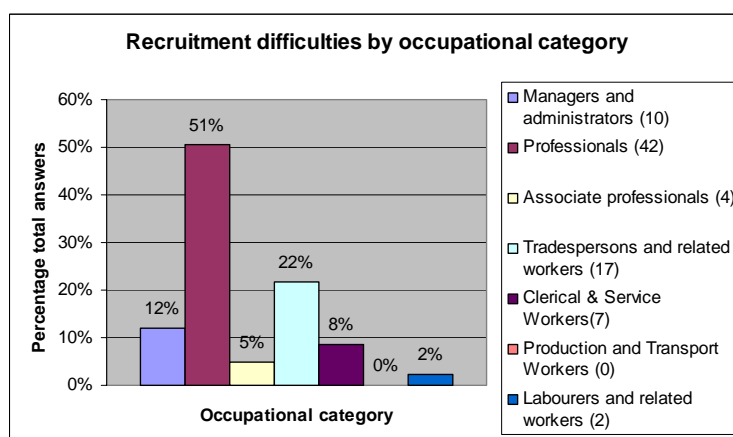


Figure 3. Recruitment difficulties by occupational category

Further examination of these results indicates that there are a number of significant differences depending on the type of company seeking these skill sets. Tables 1, 2 & 3 show the reported shortages grouped via ABS category according to the type of business; single business public or private, branches or franchises, and public service. Importantly, 67.9% of the skill shortages reported in the public sector were in the professional area, whilst the second highest shortage overall (trades & related) were required within branches or franchises with 40% of the shortages in this business type relating to this skill set.

Single business public/private by occupational category	Percentage of total answers
<u>Managers and administrators (4)</u>	11.76%
manager	50%
supervisor	25%
team leader	25%
<u>Professionals (15)</u>	44.12%
experienced accountants	13%
night audit	7%
specialist well-qualified consultants	7%
engineers	13%
environmental	7%
legal	7%
metallurgist	7%
midwives	7%
nurse	13%
optometrists	7%
other	7%
teachers	7%
<u>Associate professionals (1)</u>	2.94%
safety	100%
<u>Tradespersons and related workers (7)</u>	20.59%
butcher	14%
electricians	14%
diesel fitters	14%
horticulture	14%
maintenance	14%
mechanics	14%
tradespeople	14%
<u>Clerical & Service Workers (6)</u>	17.65%
retail staff	17%
admin staff with accounting experience	33%
housekeepers	17%
all-round office skills	17%
receptionists	17%
<u>Production and Transport Workers (0)</u>	0.00%
<u>Labourers and related workers (1)</u>	2.94%
labourers	100%
Total answers (34)	100.00%

Table 1. Recruitment difficulties in Single business public/private by occupational category

Branches or Franchises by occupational category	Percentage of Total Answers
<u>Managers and administrators (1)</u>	5%
supervisor	100%
<u>Professionals (8)</u>	40%
experienced accountants	13%
night audit	13%
engineers	38%
professional	25%
registered valuers	13%
<u>Associate professionals(1)</u>	5%
trainers	100%
<u>Tradespersons and related workers (8)</u>	40%
chefs	25%
electricians	13%
diesel fitters	13%
maintenance	13%
mechanics	13%
technical qualified people with mining experience	25%
<u>Clerical & Service Workers (1)</u>	5%
food beverage attendance	100%
<u>Production and Transport Workers (0)</u>	0%
<u>Labourers and related workers (1)</u>	5%
experience in timber	100%
Total answers (20)	100%

Table 2. Recruitment difficulties in Branches or Franchises by occupational category

Public Service by occupational category	Percentage of total answers
<i>Managers and administrators (5)</i>	17.9%
finance	20.0%
manager	20.0%
management	40.0%
experienced educator (management level)	20.0%
<i>Professionals (19)</i>	67.9%
experienced accountants	5.3%
dentist	5.3%
engineers	10.5%
environmental	15.8%
historians	5.3%
nurse	5.3%
occupational therapist	5.3%
physiotherapist	5.3%
planners	21.1%
professional	5.3%
psychologists	5.3%
teachers	10.5%
<i>Associate professionals (2)</i>	7.1%
allied health	50.0%
police auxiliaries	50.0%
<i>Tradespersons and related workers (2)</i>	7.1%
mechanics	50.0%
plumbers	50.0%
<i>Clerical & Service Workers (0)</i>	0.0%
<i>Production and Transport Workers (0)</i>	0.0%
<i>Labourers and related workers (0)</i>	0.0%
Total answers (28)	100.0%

Table 3. Recruitment difficulties in the Public Service by occupational category

Employment Levels

A further area examined in the survey was employment levels and expected growth. For analysis purposes, respondents were categorised by company size; with the cut-off being 50 employees in total. Table 4 shows the composition of the workforce in 2002, 2003 and expected levels in 2004. These results would indicate that in smaller businesses, the reported casualisation of the workforce is not occurring, with the move back to employment of fulltime staff. However, those larger organisations are showing a definite move towards an increase in the levels of part time and casual or contract staff.

Business size		2002	2003	2004
Less than 50 employees	Full time	79%	79%	88%
	Part time	14%	13%	12%
	Casual & Contract	7%	8%	0%
More than 50 employees	Full time	72%	72%	48%
	Part time	7%	7%	24%
	Casual & Contract	21%	21%	28%

Table 4. Distribution of employees by business size and contract type in the period 2002-2004

Discussion And Conclusions

The Northern Territory and regional Queensland are experiencing shortages across all three sectors in this analysis. The private sector and single privately owned business in particular are experiencing shortages and difficulty in recruiting across a wide range of employment and occupational categories. Branches and franchises are not as prone to shortages, particularly in management. It could be suggested that they are able to transfer staff to alleviate shortages in regional centres or as is often the case, service in regional centres is seen as a fast-track to promotion. The public sector, however are unable to compete with the private sector and are experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff at all levels. The lack of job security in an increasingly corporatised public service makes their lower paying jobs less attractive and increases labour market churn. What appears to be evident is that firms in regional centres are recruiting more full-time employees and this may be because if they offered part-time or casual positions these firms would be unable to recruit skilled personnel. This is one area that needs to be addressed in further studies.

The lack of skilled employees at all levels, across all sectors and all sizes of firms is a clear indication that there is insufficient training occurring in regional areas. Part of the problem may have been exacerbated by the downsizing or closure of large government business such as utilities that had in the past trained tradespersons. However the remaining businesses in growth regions have failed to fill this gap. The major gaps in the professional area particularly in health care and education, also noted by Miles, Marshall, Rolfe & Noonan (2004), are a major cause for concern. These shortages can have far reaching and long lasting effects on both communities and businesses. Governments in the past, have legislated to force businesses to spend money on training through legislation such as the Trainee Guarantee Act and this has failed. Governments need policies that encourage and reward businesses for training but it is the individual businesses and government bodies that need to take the responsibility to ensure that employees are given access to training and these efforts are recognised.

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